

A LETTER FROM HOME



THE MERIDIAN STAR

INDUSTRY & COMMERCE

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2005

Flying with a fallen angel

Capt. Wesley Pickens is a logistics officer with the Mississippi Army National Guard's 298th Corps Support Battalion.

"I joined the Guard 17 years ago to pay respect to those who have gone before me," he said. "More than just a choice, national service has always been an internal obligation."

Wesley grew up in Collinsville. In civilian life, he flies a corporate Lear jet for Sanderson Farms of Laurel; he and his wife, René, plan to move there soon to be closer to his job.

"I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my employer," he said. "They have been very supportive in dealing with my service commitments."

Wesley was deployed in December 2003 and was stationed at Camp Tagaddum near Fallujah, Iraq. When he and 60 members of the 298th returned home in January of this year, hundreds of people turned out in Philadelphia to greet them.

This story was written Jan. 1 between Iraq and Mississippi, as Wesley waited in Kuwait to board a plane that would bring him home.

By Wesley Pickens

special to The Star

With my latest year on earth drawn to a close, I am reminded of a recent evening that defined my past 12 months of life in Iraq. It is to this memory, and with loving devotion to my family, that I face the coming year.

Walking in a single file to the aft cargo ramp of the rotund C-130, I felt incredibly light as I leaned into the aircraft's circulating prop wash and struggled to carry my duffel bags and rucksack. This innate lightness stemmed mostly from the fact that I was leaving Iraq for the last time with only a few bags of gear but a head full of memories.

All of my limbs and psyche intact, I am ever thankful for the thoughts and prayers that have accompanied me to war.

Traveling to Kuwait several days before the rest of my unit, I had the charge of preparing my unit's equipment and vehicles for shipment back to Mississippi.

As I prepared to leave Iraq that evening, dozens of thoughts filled my mind. I could see the face of my beautiful wife waiting for me at the airport. I could see the rest of my family gathered around the living room floor for a delayed Christmas celebration — and I could also imagine the other members of my unit experiencing the joy of their own family reunions during the upcoming weeks.

Climbing onto the aircraft, I stowed my bags and began to buckle myself into one of the canvas seats lining the side walls of the cabin. Along the airplane's wide center aisle, pallets of outgoing mail and a small minivan were strapped to the floor.

As one of the last soldiers to board, my seat was near the rear of the aircraft, and I had an empty space before me on the deck. I remember thinking that maybe I could stretch out and catch a nap with all of the additional legroom.

I had closed my eyes and was waiting for the aircraft to begin its taxi for takeoff, when I heard a sudden change in pitch from the outside, and I realized the pilots had shut down the engines. For a moment, I thought they must have decided to take on more fuel.

One last passenger

Just as I opened my eyes, a taut-jawed Marine officer stepped onto the aircraft's ramp and stood before me.

As the engines continued to wind down, the officer told the passengers that our departure would be delayed for a few minutes. He informed us that we would be sharing the flight to Kuwait with a fallen angel.

A pony-tailed government contractor, accompanying us on our flight, asked the

See [Angel](#)

Page 31

INSIDE THIS SECTION

Look for other stories about the 298th Corps Support Battalion and the 367th Maintenance Company throughout this special edition. In the "Industry and Commerce" section:

- A picture is worth a thousand words.

Page 24

- DeKalb welcomes home the 367th.

Page 20

- A complete list of contributors to the "Industry and Commerce" section.

Page 2



PHOTO BY PAULA MERRITT / THE MERIDIAN STAR

FAMILY HUG

René Pickens hugs her husband, Capt. Wesley Pickens, as his mother, Joyce, and father, Elwin Pickens also celebrate his safe return home after a year of military service in Iraq. Capt. Pickens is a member of the 298th Corps Support Battalion of the Mississippi Army National Guard in Philadelphia. Sixty members of the unit returned home Jan. 6.



PHOTO BY PAULA MERRITT / THE MERIDIAN STAR

WELCOME HOME

Spc. Sarah Jones receives a rose from her husband, Joey, as she returns home from Iraq. The couple was married Nov. 29, 2003 — only 11 days before Sarah was deployed with the Mississippi Army National Guard's 298th Corps Support Battalion.

Philadelphia: Home of the 298th, 367th

By Steve Gillespie

special to The Star

The history of the 298th Corps Support Battalion, based in Philadelphia, goes back to Jan. 1, 1943, when it was activated at Fort Knox, Ken.

The Mississippi Army National Guard unit participated in the European Campaign during World War II as part of the 750th Tank Battalion, which was inactivated in December 1945 in New York. On March 16, 1951, the 750th Tank Battalion was allotted to the Mississippi National Guard and was organized on May 28, 1951, in Philadelphia.

On Nov. 1, 1955, the unit was reorgan-

ized and redesignated as the Second Battalion of the 108th Armored Cavalry.

On May 1, 1959, the unit was reorganized and redesignated as the 1st Medium Tank Battalion, 198th Armor, and assigned to the 31st Infantry Division. It was later redesignated as the 1st Battalion 198th Armor in 1963.

On Feb. 15, 1968, the unit was reorganized and redesignated as Headquarters and Headquarters Company 298th Maintenance Battalion.

Other reorganizations and redesignations continued throughout the early 1970s

See [Philadelphia](#)

Page 31